

Q: Frazier, United States Naval Reserve, and Mr. Jerome Green of the National Park Service. I'm from the Naval Historical Center, and we're supporting the National Park Service and the USS Arizona Memorial. The interview is being conducted at the Ala Moana Hotel in Honolulu. Today's date is the sixth of December, 2001, and we're commencing the interview at approximately fifteen thirty with Mr. Robert Bissell, who was a Seaman First Class, Naval Air Station Ford Island, as a coxswain of a fifty-foot motor launch, a liberty boat, on the seventh of December, 1941. Mr. Bissell, for the record, if you would please state your full name, place of birth, and date of birth.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Robert D. Bissell. I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, November eleventh, November eighteenth, 1918.

Q: What did you consider to be your hometown in 1941?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Lorain, Ohio. My folks had moved from Cleveland to Lorain, Ohio.

Q: What were your parents' names?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Ray L. Bissell was my father, and Mildred A. Bissell was my mother.

Q: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Robert DeVere Bissell: I had three brothers. My older brother, Richard, was already in the Navy. He had uh.. had broken service. He had put in a Kitty cruise from uh.. 1937 to '40, and then he had gone back in at '40. He'd gotten out for a short period of time and then gone back in.

Q: How much older was he?

Robert DeVere Bissell: He was a year and a day older than I was. He was stationed in Norfolk, and because of him I went down to visit him, and while I

was down to visit him in Norfolk, uh.. I joined the Navy, and that's how come I got in the Navy.

Q: You anticipated my next question, how- how you came to be in the Navy.

Robert DeVere Bissell: That's what happened. <Laugh>

Q: Did your parents know you were gonna do that?

Robert DeVere Bissell: No, they didn't. And by that time I was twenty-one years old, so I signed my own papers and went in.

Q: Sure. Where did you go to high school?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Mayfield High School in Mayfield Heights, Ohio, and I put in two years of college at Baldwin Wallace University in- uh.. Baldwin Wallace College in Berea, Ohio.

Q: And we were chatting a little bit before the interview, and you told me you came to the Hawaiian Islands in October of 1940?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir, that's right.

Q: Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Well, I joined the Navy in May of 1940, and after I finished boot camp, they sent us cross country by train to San Diego. We got to San Diego, they assigned us to the different destroyers that were being put back in commission from World War One, old four-stack destroyers. And I was assigned to the Chew 103, and that was- that was my duty station.

Q: But at some point you were- you were transferred to Naval Air Station.

<crew talk>

Q: Let's go back to Ford Island. Could you talk to us about being assigned to the Chew, and then being selected for your duty in- at- at Ford Island?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Well, you can well imagine being a- a World War One ship, even though it was in mothballs, it was in pretty bad shape, and we had to uh.. chip all that rust and- and try to clean the ship up and put it back in commission. Uh.. They had recalled a bunch of the reserves who had worked- who had been in World War One. They uh.. there were all types of uh.. rates, and one of those people that were- they were just uh.. really good sailors and they had done a good job, and they put those sailors on there like machinist's mates, and bosun mates, and uh.. gunner's mates. And they taught us what to do and how to do it, and they uh.. taught us how to uh.. chip paint and how to- how to paint and how to uh.. really put the ship back in shape. And within three months we had the ship back in shape. At that time uh.. we got orders to move to the Pacific, and there were three ships that I can remember that were in our squadron, the Allen, the Chew, and I don't remember the name of the third one. And when we got to uh.. Pearl Harbor, we were used to cooler weather. It was so hot that we took our bedrolls up on deck and- and slept on deck. It was in uh.. in October. Went swimming and the people in Honolulu just thought we were crazy because uh.. going swimming in the ocean at that time of the year. But to us it was uh.. very hot out here. The uh.. most of the uh.. seamen, uh.. the young sailors with- that I was with uh.. were transferred to Ford Island at that time, and the crew was uh.. manned by reserves who were called in and they took over the ships.

Q: How did you find Honolulu and Hawaii coming from Ohio like?

Robert DeVere Bissell: I really enjoyed it. I thought it was uh.. wonderful and uh.. it was good duty, and we just uh.. we really enjoyed it.

Q: Is there anything that sticks out special? How- how- what- what would you do when you had- when you had liberty?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Uh.. I would uh.. workout and I would try to uh.. go swimming when I went- went ashore or maybe I would- uh.. would uh.. go out and have dinner some place. Uh.. I didn't drink, and I didn't smoke, and I was uh.. I tried to uh.. to keep in shape and be a- a model sailor.

Q: Do you remember going to the YMCA?

Robert DeVere Bissell: No. We didn't go to the Y, but we had a place where we worked out on the- at uh.. Ford Island, and uh.. so we were able to workout right there.

Q: You were telling me earlier that you boxed.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir, I did. And uh.. my first fight was on uh.. Friday before December seventh. I fought a big Marine off the uh.. California.

Q: Did- I guess Destroyer Chew didn't know that you were such a good boxer, or they wouldn't- I'm surprised they let you go.

Robert DeVere Bissell: <Laugh> Well, I don't think that would have entered into it at that time. I think they were just uh.. trying to uh.. to get the reserves back in to active duty at that time.

Q: Let's, you know, focus on the- on that particular weekend. You fought- you- you fought that Marine in- on Friday night? Was a smoker?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir.

Q: You said you beat him in the second round.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir. I broke his nose. They stopped the fight, and the morning of December seventh, as we- uh.. when we got to the fleet landing, he was coming off the California. He was coming up the landing, and I ran into him. He said, "Bissell, I'd rather fight you again than go through this."

Q: That was- that was Sunday morning?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Sunday morning after the- after the- after the California had gotten hit.

Q: Oh, I see. What- what did you do on the sixth? Did you have- was that a duty weekend for you?

Robert DeVere Bissell: It was, and Sunday morning I didn't have to get up early. We went out- went ashore that night and had dinner and just fooled around, got back uh.. probably around eleven o'clock or so. Went to sleep. When- when the uh.. bosun came through at eight o'clock in the morning, or ten minutes to eight and said that the Japs were attacking, somebody said, "Hit him in the head with a shoe. He's going out of his mind." And at that time we were- we heard all this, the bombs exploding. We heard the uh.. torpedoes hitting, and uh.. we ran to the window at the boathouse. We lived above the boathouse. Uh.. The uh.. the dormitory was built right above the slips of the boat- of the uh.. boathouse. And we looked out and saw what was happening.

Q: This is on Ford Island?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir.

Q: What did you think?

Robert DeVere Bissell: We didn't know what to think. We saw our ships being- going down, those battleships we thought were invincible. And it was just total despair. You couldn't- you couldn't imagine <crying> seeing those ships going down. We uh.. manned our boats. We didn't- I didn't use the fifty-foot motor launch because it was too big to get out there. But I- we did- we took the smaller boats and went out and tried to save people. Uh.. <Clears throat> The water became so filled with debris and there was so much uh.. confusion and- and uh.. water caught on fire. The uh.. oil on the water uh.. caught on fire, and one by one our boats were getting disabled because of the uh.. debris in the water and the oil. And we had to tow some back in, and uh.. so at that point, there was no more we could do because there was- uh.. it was total chaos.

Q: When did you man your boats?

Robert DeVere Bissell: When we went- we got dressed and went down below and manned the boats.

Q: Right away.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir. And at that time, we uh.. I grabbed a couple of- of uh.. the crew and uh.. we went over to the garage, broke into the garage, got the keys for the- some of the trucks, and the two men that were with me, we uh.. got a two ton flatbed truck, went up to the uh.. landing, the boat landing on Ford.

<crew talk>

Q: I just asked who you worked for there at the boathouse. Why don't we get that for the- for the record?

Robert DeVere Bissell: The uh.. the Petty Officer in charge was a third class bosun mate, and he uh.. he ran the boathouse. Then we had a chief bosun mate who lived on the base, and he was our- uh.. he was our chief. He was the one we- we looked- uh.. looked up to.

Q: And you recall the third class.

Robert DeVere Bissell: No. I was a seaman at that time.

Q: I know. So you recall the third class bosun mate getting- rallying you guys.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir.

Q: Yeah.

Robert DeVere Bissell: And at that time they called the third-class bosun mate a coxswain, and that's what he- that's what we called the third-class bosun mate. Uh.. At that time, like I say, we- we tried to uh.. act where- we couldn't do anymore. We went over to the garage. We broke into the garage, into the public works uh.. garage, and uh.. I found the keys to a two-ton flatbed truck. Took that down to the boat landing. That's where I ran into that Marine. And at that time, these two sailors and I loaded uh.. everybody we could onto the flatbed truck because, like I say, the sickbay uh.. on that

side, on the main side of the- of the Island was full, and so we drove around the Island over to the other side, to uh.. to take 'em to the infirmary on the other side of the Island. And while we were going over there, they were strafing us, but none of us, uh.. we didn't get hit. We didn't lose anybody on that deal. And uh.. so when uh.. we got everybody over there that we could at that time, and then we went back to the boathouse and put- we took the truck back. Went back to the boathouse. At that time the chief bosun was there, and the rest of the day we spent digging foxholes.

Q: You spoke about the- the big ships.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir.

Q: Were damaged so badly.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir.

Q: Could you take a moment and re- reflect on that, and- and describe what you saw, what you can remember seeing?

Robert DeVere Bissell: When the uh.. you could see the torpedoes going through the water, to the ships. They were running shallow, and uh.. when they'd hit there'd just be just such a tremendous explosion you couldn't believe. And like I say, we thought those ships were invincible. We didn't think that anything would ever happen to them. That was- that was our security, you know.

Q: Was the coxswain with you? How many people were there in the boathouse? How many people did you work with?

Robert DeVere Bissell: We probably had a crew of probably uh.. forty, forty-five people.

Q: Did you- how did you know what to do?

Robert DeVere Bissell: I used instinct. I don't know. I don't- I don't remember anybody ever telling us what to do or uh.. how to do it. We received a Presidential Citation.

Q: You said you were operating boats for awhile.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir.

Q: As long as they would operate.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir.

Q: What do you remember of that?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Well, the oil got into the- into the uh.. screws and the engine, and we- we couldn't- some of 'em we couldn't use anymore, and uh.. and some of 'em the props had hit debris in the water. The uh.. the crash boat crew took their- took their big boat out, and it wasn't just a short time that they were uh.. unable to operate.

Q: Were you- were you trying to conduct rescue operations?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir.

Q: To recover people?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir. The uh.. as I said before, all the boat crew got Presidential Citations.

Q: What did you do that night?

Robert DeVere Bissell: That night the uh.. about ten o'clock, we got an alert that the Japs were coming in. We uh.. we heard these planes coming in, and it was B-17s coming in from the States, and they didn't have the proper code to let them know who they were, and the uh.. and so we started firing at 'em, and we shot one down, and uh.. and they were our own planes.

Q: Were you involved in that?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Well, I was- I was there. I don't know, you know, what we did as far as knocking anything down, but we- we did what we could, you know. And we just thought it was uh.. enemy planes, and- and uh.. we didn't know 'til afterward that they were our own planes.

Q: You were armed though.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir. By that time we were. We didn't- weren't at first.

Q: What- what- what did you have for arms?

Robert DeVere Bissell: M-1s and- and we had uh.. AR uh.. what do they call, AR uh..

Q: BAR?

Robert DeVere Bissell: BAR. Right. But we weren't really equipped to do battle, but <sniff>.

Q: It was a long night.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir. Several long nights and long days, believe me. We thought we were gonna be attacked, and so that's why we dug the foxholes, 'cause we thought sure that they were gonna come in.

Q: Where did you dig the foxholes?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Right around the vicinity of the boathouse.

Q: Was the boathouse damaged?

Robert DeVere Bissell: No, sir. No. We didn't have any damage at all, and uh.. and as far as I know, we didn't lose anybody.

Q: Did you do any shooting yourself?

Robert DeVere Bissell: No, sir. We had a uh.. Marine colonel who was in charge of the Marine Corps on the base, and he was uh.. he had his people out and- and they were very active and did what they could. Uh.. In fact, yesterday, day before yesterday, when I was here, I was talking to that commander. Uh.. After I walked out, there were two ladies approached me, and one of 'em said, "Were you on Ford Island?" I had my tag on. They said, "Were you on Ford Island?" I said, "Yes." And they said, "Well, did you know our father? He was the Marine Colonel in charge of the Marine C- the Marine base on- on Ford Island, the Marine Corps on Ford Island." And I said, "Yes. I knew him. I knew who he was." Of course, I didn't rub elbows with him, 'cause I was a seaman. He was a colonel, but I did know him, and they were thrilled to death. They said I was the first one that they'd ever run into from Ford Island.

Q: What did Ford Island look like? The PBYs were- were struck there.

Robert DeVere Bissell: It was- they were completely demolished. It was pitiful. They just uh.. all the fighter planes and all the PBYs were just uh.. just disintegrated. There was nothing left there.

Q: A question, how- how did your family find out eventually how you were safe, that you were safe?

Robert DeVere Bissell: After, I think it was probably about a week or ten days, maybe two weeks before I was able to get a card off to 'em and tell 'em that I was okay, and- and then they uh.. received a copy of the citation, and they- uh.. they put it in the paper, and whatnot.

Q: There are accounts of the heroism that the boat crews displayed that morning.

Robert DeVere Bissell: There are?

Q: And there's photographs, as Mr. Green mentioned.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Very good.

Q: I'm wondering what it must-- I- I just can't imagine what it would have been like, the fire, the damage, people in the water. When you were rescuing people from the water, pulling people aboard, were you fishing bodies out, too?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir.

Q: What about your own safety? Did you- were there things that you couldn't do?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Oh, I'd have to admit I was- I was really- I figured that maybe I'd get hit, you know, but I- uh.. fortunately I didn't.

Q: Well, we- we've spent a lot of time talking about that morning. Did you remain the coxswain there and continue those duties?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Oh, uh.. I guess I should tell you that uh.. after that, I made third-class, and they shipped me to Palmyra Island. No. They sh- uh.. they shipped me to Prince Frigate Shoals, which was half way between Hawaii and- and Midway. And while I was at Prince Frigate Shoals, they had uh.. was the Battle of Midway. And then I was sent back to Ford Island and sometime in between- between there I made second class. And then I was shipped to uh.. Palmyra. I spent nine months there. I made chief before I went to Palmyra. Uh.. And when I got to Palmyra Island, I was the coxswain- I was- I was the skipper of a hundred and three foot AR salvage derrick. And 'course, the war was still going on. And at that time, we would, if a plane went down or was damaged at sea, or uh.. the fighter planes we had, if they crashed, we'd use a Maryann to pick 'em up and- and bring 'em back in. It had a boom on it. Uh.. It was uh.. had a high tower on it for a- a coxswain, and it was- uh.. if ships came in it would- uh.. had stuff that was too heavy that they couldn't unload it, sometimes we'd use a Maryann to unload some of the cargo. And uh.. at that time, I was recommended for officer candidate school, and my division officer was the one that recommended me. And they said that uh.. the bureau came back and said that all the recommendations were- were alright. But at that time they- they

had recommended me for a landing craft officer. And they weren't making anymore landing craft officers at that time, so I didn't get the commission. But then uh.. and it was fifty-six months from the time that I went out before I got back the first time. And when I got back they assigned me to San Diego uh.. training recruits.

Q: Glad to be back?

Robert DeVere Bissell: Oh, it was a- I- I'll tell you what. I was just about on edge at that time.

Q: Well, the- the tape's running out. Is there anything that you'd like to say that we didn't ask?

Robert DeVere Bissell: No, sir. I'm sorry that I uh.. came apart, but.

Q: We want to thank you very much.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir.

Q: For your time. It's wonderful for you to contribute this.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Thank you.

Q: We thank you for your service.

Robert DeVere Bissell: Yes, sir. Thank you.

End of Tape 416 Robert DeVere Bissell